

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 713

CS 508 832

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TITLE Story-Telling as a Teaching-Learning Strategy: A Nonnative Instructor's Perspective.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (80th, New Orleans, LA, November 19-22, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Context; English (Second Language); Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Multicultural Education; *Narration; *Story Telling; Student Needs; *Teaching Methods; *Teaching Styles
IDENTIFIERS *Nonnative Speakers; Rhetorical Strategies

ABSTRACT

The challenge facing the nonnative instructor is make his or her cultural uniqueness an asset instead of a liability. If nonnative speakers can never be fully accepted by American students because of their accent and different communication styles, they can employ teaching styles and methods that showcase their strong points. One teaching method especially useful to the nonnative speaker is story telling. Story telling allows the instructor to connect with his or her students through pathos, logos and ethos: reasoning is made clear; students are impressed with the instructor's foreign experiences; and students are likely to empathize. Story telling also has the benefit of being pluralistic; it cultivates an inclusive, reciprocal relationship between and among instructor and students. Rather than depending on the conveyance of conventional knowledge, storytelling centers on the creation and recreation of fresh stories by both the instructor and the students. Story telling as a teaching strategy enables U.S. students to visualize the substance of multiculturalism that nonnative instructors are equipped to offer. Besides, story telling is an effective means of earning student respect. (TB)

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Story-telling As a Teaching-learning Strategy:
A Nonnative Instructor's Perspective

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Paper presented at the 80th Annual Convention
of the Speech Communication Association
in New Orleans, Louisiana
November 19-22, 1994

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Abstract:

Story-telling As a Teaching-learning Strategy:

A Nonnative Instructor's Perspective

Nonnative instructors have always faced the challenge to change themselves from being perceived as a liability to an asset to the U.S. higher education. In this essay, story-telling, introduced as a teaching strategy for nonnative instructors to fulfill this goal, is viewed from two theoretical frameworks: (a) It can be viewed as a rhetorical strategy combining ethos, logos, and pathos; and (b) it reflects a pluralistic approach to instructional communication. It is argued that the adoption of this strategy can easily expose U.S. students to the substance of multiculturalism, which, in turn, changes their perceptions toward nonnative instructors.

Story-telling As a Teaching-learning Strategy:

A Nonnative Instructor's Perspective

Nonnative instructors can hardly be fully accepted by U.S. students due to their accented English and different communication styles. However, as U.S. students are increasingly exposed to multiculturalism, they may begin to realize that nonnative instructors can offer many things that are generally unavailable from native instructors, such as multicultural experiences and different perspectives on an issue (Ma, 1993). In other words, nonnative instructors are not necessarily perceived inferior to their native counterpart; they are just "different." Their nonnative background can be a "virtue" or "vice," or both. The real challenge to a nonnative instructor is, therefore, how to transform his or her unique cultural background from being perceived as a liability into an asset.

While many problems have been identified in previous studies with regard to the communication between nonnative instructors and their U.S. students (e.g., Bailey, 1984; Bauer, 1991; Franck & Desousa, 1982; Ross & Krider, 1992), how nonnative instructors can improve their teaching, or even take advantage of their cultural background to improve their teaching, has not been explored. This paper intends to address why story-telling can become a useful teaching-learning strategy especially for nonnative instructors. More specifically, story-telling as a teaching-learning strategy for nonnative instructors will be discussed from the following

two perspectives: (a) It can be viewed as a rhetorical strategy combining *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*; and (b) it reflects a pluralistic approach to instructional communication.

Story-telling As a Rhetorical Strategy

Teaching as a communication process involves intensive sending of messages by the instructor. The adoption of good rhetorical strategies by the instructor is beneficial to both the instructor and his or her students. A traditional approach to evaluating a rhetorical strategy is to appraise the three forms of proof, *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, as artistically created by the speaker. According to Golden et al. (1992), *logos* refers to those proofs "which demonstrate that a thing is so" (p. 30). The proofs "which depend for their effectiveness on the believability of the speaker" are *ethos* (p. 30). *Pathos* denotes those proofs "designed to sway a listener's feelings" (p. 30). The three were originally introduced by Aristotle and have been applied in various rhetorical analyses in the West. Although the concept of the three rhetorical proofs is relatively simply, it covers major factors in a message-sending process.

Story-telling as a rhetorical strategy adopted by a nonnative instructor can be viewed from the three forms of proof as well. Through vivid story-telling, the reasoning implied in the nonnative instructor's lecture is made clear to students. By telling a story, a nonnative instructor is also

able to impress students with his or her unique foreign experiences, and thus enhance his or her ethos. Furthermore, U.S. students are likely to empathize or sympathize with an instructor whom they become to know as a real person through personalized episodes.

For example, in my public speaking class, I told a story about the use of pythons as a visual aid by one of my former students in his demonstrative speech. I used the story to exemplify the improper use of visual aids that can cause a diffusion of audience's attention from the main theme of the speech. My students enjoyed listening to the story because it was a quite unusual but true story. Through my vivid description, they could "visualize" how the whole class was frightened by the huge, ill-smelling animal being displayed in front of them. While I was providing the details of the story, I also shared my reasoning and feeling with my students. I mentioned to them that although the pythons were a good attention getter and pertinent visual aid, they posed a serious threat to the whole class since pythons eat live animals. The pythons looked very threatening, so most students in the class could not concentrate on his speech. "As the instructor of the class," I said, "I did not know how I should respond to the situation since it was the first time I had ever seen a student bring pythons to my class." Then I added that I decided to let the student complete his speech and not make any comment about his speech until the next

class, so the pythons could be "excused" from the class with their "master" early. In other words, I did not adopt a confrontational approach in dealing with the student. When I shared with my students a "foreign" perspective of "crisis management," the eye contact that I received clearly indicated they not only "reasoned" but also empathized with me on the "pythons" event. In addition, I felt that my *ethos* was enhanced by telling the story because my students began to realize I was an experienced public speaking instructor. The story made it clear that I have taught public speaking for several years and have experienced many unusual happenings in my classes. My students also became aware of my capability in dealing with unexpected difficult situations.

It is usually difficult for a nonnative instructor to build trust and credibility among U.S. students by direct appeals, such as emphasizing his or her own teaching experience or scholarly accomplishments in the subject. Many U.S. students' response to these appeals tend to be "Well, I know you are knowledgeable, but so what? You won't be a good teacher because you're a foreigner." Story-telling, however, brings to U.S. students a concrete picture of "what a nonnative instructor really is." As a general rule, rhetorically effective instructors are most likely to create an environment conducive for learning. The *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* derived from story-telling can make a nonnative instructor both meaningful and attractive to students.

Story-telling As Pluralistic Instruction

Story-telling as an approach to instructional communication has been addressed within different theoretical frameworks. Conquergood (1989) notes that "Cultures and selves are not given, they are made; even, like fictions, they are 'made up' . . . they hold out the promise of reimagining and refashioning the world" (p. 83). Pineau (1994) further indicates that this creative and constructed view of education recognizes that "educators and students engage not in 'the pursuit of truths,' but in collaborative fictions--perpetually making and remaking world views and their tenuous positions within them" (p. 10). Therefore, the whole educational system can be conceptualized as being performance-oriented:

. . . performance reframes the whole educational enterprise as a mutable and ongoing ensemble of narratives and performances, rather than a linear accumulation of isolated, discipline-specific competencies. (p. 10)

From Conquergood and Pineau's perspective, the value of story-telling lies not only in the teaching effectiveness but also in its reflection of an open educational system. This system, as the performance paradigm suggests, is pluralistic and nonhierarchical (Pineau, 1994).

According to Fisher (1987), all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories. His narrative paradigm symbolizes human communication as an

interplay of reason, value, and action (p. 59). It can be considered as a dialectical synthesis of "the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme" (p. 58). In the rational-world paradigm, which by and large reflects the Aristotelian reasoning, "argument as product and process is the means of being human," and questions of value is excluded from the scope of scientific method (pp. 59-60). However, "narrative rationality" does not agree with this "traditional rationality":

Traditional rationality is . . . a normative construct. Narrative rationality is, on the other hand, descriptive; it offers an account, an understanding, of any instance of human choice and action, including science. (p. 66)

While traditional rationality suggests that only some people are qualified to judge and to lead and others are to follow, narration implies that all persons are seen as having the capacity to be rational (p. 68). The narrative paradigm also treats meaning as being "a matter of history, culture, and character as well as of linguistic convention and interanimation" (p. 90).

Story-telling as an approach to instructional communication reflects the conceptualization of all human beings as "*Homo narrans*" as proposed by the narrative paradigm of human communication (Fisher, 1987, p. xi). Classroom learning is viewed as a process of continual re-creation of stories by both the instructor and students rather than

injection of conventional knowledge into students' mind. It is a pedagogy that promotes pluralistic thinking and champions a multivocal system.

Lack of pluralistic thinking among administrators and students at U.S. institutions of higher education is a major reason for the role of nonnative instructors to be downplayed. For example, despite their different cultural backgrounds, nonnative instructors are expected to behave assertively, or even aggressively, at faculty meetings. Otherwise, his or her access to some important resources may become very limited. U.S. students also tend to take advantage of the non-confrontational style adopted by many nonnative instructors. Story-telling as a teaching strategy can, however, promote pluralistic thinking among U.S. students. It empowers a nonnative instructor through legitimatizing his or her multicultural experiences. When his or her stories are perceived full of non-artificial novelty, his or her perceived status is also converted from being a liability to an asset. For example, I usually told the following story to link intrapersonal communication to interpersonal communication:

While I was driving on a road near Daytona Beach, Florida during the Christmas recess in 1984, I saw a "drive-in church." It immediately attracted my attention, then I engaged in a long self-talk. I first asked myself why I seemed to be shock by this scene. I came up with the following two questions: "why do they have to go to a

church if they are really so busy?" and "why would they rather stay in their car if they really want to show faith in God?" A few minutes later, I told myself, "why not?" and began to defend "drive-in church" goers. First, time is money in this culture. People are used to keeping a busy schedule. They do not want to waste any time. Second, public transportation is poor in most areas of this country, so almost everyone has to drive. "Drive-in" services are designed for the convenience of these drivers. Finally, according to some books I have read before, in this individualistic society, many people are emotionally insecure. Religious affiliation can give them a sense of security. At this point, the intercultural conflict in my mind was resolved. Can you see the influence of this process of intrapersonal communication on my future communication with Americans on such an issue? . . .

The above story encouraged pluralistic thinking from my students. Their thoughts regarding "why a drive-in church?" and "why not a drive-in church?" were unlikely to terminate with the closure of my story-telling session. Through story-telling, what my students obtained from my class was not an exercise of positivistic reasoning; instead, it was a challenge to their existing frame of reference.

There is no pre-determined logic implied in this story. Instead of providing a normative framework for students, the

story demystifies the concept of a universal logic. While the role of value in reasoning and human communication is incorporated in the narrative paradigm, the concept of multiple perspectives of human communication is only implied. Unless U.S. students are exposed to pluralistic thinking implied in the teaching of multiple perspectives of human communication they are not adequately prepared for a future career in an increasingly multicultural world. However, the "traditional rationality" training that students are still receiving tends not to permit them to explore other alternatives. Therefore, it is not easy for a nonnative instructor to propose a non-Western thinking pattern to students directly. Under these circumstances, the adoption of story-telling as a teaching strategy to open up the views of U.S. students seems to be a very promising approach.

Concluding Remarks

Although multiculturalism has been promoted for many years on U.S. campuses, it is often taken as a political issue instead of an intellectual issue. It will remain to be so if most U.S. students are unable to see the "benefits" associated with multiculturalism. On the other hand, nonnative instructors will be perceived to be a liability at U.S. institutions of higher education as long as they are unaware of what they can offer. The use of well-prepared stories incorporating varied culture experiences by nonnative instructors often "kills two birds with one stone." In other

words, story-telling as a teaching strategy enables U.S. students to visualize the substance of multiculturalism that nonnative instructors are equipped to offer. Besides, nonnative instructors can earn more respect from their students.

As suggested in different theoretical constructs, story-telling is counter-normative and pro-pluralistic in nature, so multiple perspectives of communication can more easily reside in a story than a sermon. Furthermore, pluralistic thinking wrapped with novelty and intriguing schemes as presented in a story are like a sugar-coated medicine that is usually more appealing to its consumers.

The pluralistic instruction offered by nonnative instructors is trying to teach U.S. students how to "shift gears" in order to become a "qualified" citizen of the global village. This change, in turn, will influence the image of nonnative instructors in the U.S. system of higher education. The "win-win" goal is likely to be fulfilled without radical actions on either side through exuberant stories carefully prepared by nonnative instructors.

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